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THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE
Author of "Caleb Conover, Railroadman," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's Trail," etc.
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(Continued.)

"They're waiting for you," said he catching up with Conover. The Committee went to its room five minutes ago, packing in single file like the Court of Priests in Aida. Can't you manage to tremble a little? It seems hardly much really, but it's a necessity. You should be wasted on a man who doesn't care. Why are you late?"

"I'm always late to an appointment," answered Conover. Make the other fellow do the waiting. Don't do it yourself. Lots of time saved that way." Caine threw open a door and ushered Caleb into a room where a dozen or more men were seated about a long table. Bowing carefully to the members in general, Caine took a seat at the table, and motioned Conover toward a chair that had been placed for the purpose at the lower end of the apartment. Conover, disregarding the gesture, slouched across to a more comfortable leather chair, pulled it to the window, flung himself into the seat, his back to the strong afternoon light, and drew out a cigar.

"Now then, gentlemen," he ordered curtly, as he struck a match on his sole. "Be as brief as you can. Mr. Caine's worth money. What do you want of me?"

A murmur—almost a stifled gasp—went around the table, at the contempt in his action. There was an embarrassed pause. Then Reuben Standish, as Chairman of the Committee, rose, gray and portentious, and turned toward Caleb.

"Mr. Conover," he began, "certain statements—charges, in fact—have been made to the Committee, relative to yourself. It is your duty to hear them in detail. I will now read—"

"Never mind that!" commanded Conover. "Just give the gist of the thing. Cut out the details."

Standish glared reprovingly at the wholly unimpressed man at the window. But as the latter purposely sat with his back to the light, his expression was quite illegible.

"Just as you wish," resumed the Chairman after a moment's hesitation. "The papers I was about to read are to the effect that you are declared to be in no sense a desirable member of the Arareek Club, either from a personal or a business standpoint. Believe me, I regret the necessity of—"

"Oh, I'll take your grief for granted," interrupted Conover. "This meeting's been called, as I understand it, to kick me out of the Arareek."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Conover," urged Standish civilly. "We wish—"

"Be quiet," said Caleb. "I'm talking now. You want to know of this Club. Well, you can't do it. You can't stir me an inch. I'm no measly lamb, like the one in the circus 'Happy Family' where the lion an' the lamb live together in one cage; an' where the lamb's got to be renewed ev'ry now an' then, on the sly, I didn't butt in here. I was elected one of the members of the Club rules. And till I do, here I'm goin' to stay. Is that clear? There ain't a law in the land that can get me out. Lord! But I'm not a coward. I'll hear a pack of snafes like you, tryin' to scare a grown man. It won't work. Now we understand each other. Anythin' more?"

Amid the buzz, a man half way down the table spoke.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that we don't quite understand each other, Mr. Conover. This is not a business concern. It is a social club. It is a place where the women of our families are also welcome guests. The presence of a man we cannot introduce to our wives and daughters will only—"

"Why can't you?" demanded Conover. "Why can't you introduce me?"

An' for that matter, I haven't asked you to, yet. Wait till I do, before you say you can't."

"This club," went on the other, "represents all that is best and most congenial in Granite's social life. With a discordant element introduced into it, the club's character is lost. If there is a man who frequents the place whom we do not know and whom we do not wish to know—who cannot meet our standards—"

"I see we'll have to waste more time over this than I thought," grunted Caleb. "Let's go back a little. Why don't you wait till I do?"

"Need we go into that? Surely—"

"As you have made it one of the reasons for wantin' me fired, I guess you'd better. Why don't you want to know me?"

"If you force me to say it, because you are not a gentleman."

"No?" answered Caleb, as a new and fainter murmur of denunciation ran along the table. "Maybe I'm not. I don't get tanked up on cheap booze down in the bar after golf tournaments like a lot of your gentlemen here, an' then wander up to dinner on the veranda an' talk so loud that the women at the next table can't hear themselves cackle. I don't ask pay of men and women to dine with me here an' then get a silly jag an' sing minutes during the meal till ev'rybody at the table gets scared for fear I'll sing somethin' worse—like you did last Sunday night."

Conover's interlocutor sat down very hard and tried to look loftily indifferent. Caine's undisguised laugh made the effort more difficult.

"No," pursued Caleb, with imperious calm. "I'm not a gentleman. I used to think maybe I'd like to be one. But I don't any more. I come down here for dinner sometimes Sunday evenin'. As there's no one exactly clamorin' to entertain me, I've plenty of chance to use my eyes an' ears. So I get a line on 'em. I remember an' act when they're in their own crowd. At the table next to me last Sunday, there was a little dinner party. 'Bout a dozen in all. You was givin' it, I believe, Mr. Featherstone. By the time dessert came ev'rybody was a-tellin' stories. Stories I wouldn't tell in a barroom. Women, too. Gee! I never knew before that women—"

"Mr. Chairman!" cried Featherstone, jumping up. "I protest against this abuse. As a member of the Arareek—"

"As a member of the Arareek," cut in Caleb, "you'll set down an' be quiet. You've had your say. When I've just told, I've told as a member of the Club—an' to fellow-members. Of course I'm kicked out of the Arareek—an' kicked out on your vote. Featherstone—I won't feel bound to keep my mouth shut about those same stories or who told 'em. Nor what you whispered to a girl as you passed my table on your way out. If—"

"This is blackmail!" shrieked Featherstone. "I—"

"It's anything you like to name it," agreed Caleb, cheerfully. "But it goes. Understand that. Anyone else got somethin' to say?"

"I should like to ask Mr. Conover," put in another man, "if he can truthfully deny that his business dealings will not bear such inspection as—"

"As your own deal in buyin' the tip of where the new High School was to be built an' then gettin' an option on the land an' squazin' the city for \$48,000?" asked Conover. "Oh, I guess most of my business will frame up pretty well alongside of that. Say, your talk of 'business methods' make me laugh. I remember what you offered for that tip an' who you went shakin' with on the money you got. As a feller Club member, my mouth's

shut on that. When I'm kicked out, I'll be a different story. That's black-mail again, if you like."

A nervous, gray-haired man at the foot of the board checked comment by saying:

"It's scarcely needful, Mr. Conover, to adopt that tone. For the sake of the club's good name, we are simply trying to get to the truth of certain reports of the way your money was made. We—"

"It's my own business how it was made, Mr. Hawarden," countered Caleb. "The way I spend it is anybody's business. An' when I leave this Club I'm willin' to make public the accounts of some of my disbursements."

Though the retort was not rough of tone and seemed quite harmless—even devoid of meaning, Hawarden all at once dropped out of the dispute. In vain he several of his fellow Committee men who had relied on him to press the prosecution, signal for a renewal of attack. Thereafter, through the mission, Hawarden was given a mute. But there were others to carry on the attack he had so unexpectedly abandoned. Notably a downy little man who sat at Reuben Standish's right.

"It is said, Mr. Conover," observed the new assailant, with an air of nervousness, "that your father was a convict."

Again the murmur of denunciation at the bland brutality of the assault. Caine leaned forward, hoping to catch a glimpse of Caleb's silhouetted face, and half expecting to see the downy-haired accuser tossed bodily from the room.

For an instant, Conover made no reply. His cigar had gone out and he was busy fumbling for a match. But when he lighted it, it was with perfect, unaffected calm.

"Yes, Mr. Vroom," he said. "My father was a convict. He may be one again, for this time, for any one knows. I've never set eyes on the old crook since the day they sentenced him to five years in the pen."

He puffed his cigar. Then rambled on, half to himself:

"I was ten years old then. It was my birthday. I remember. The old lady an' I, in the C. G. & X. yards. I came home early from school. Ma had promised me a birthday cake with candles for supper. She an' dad had planned to have some little celebration for me, an' take me to a variety show in the evenin'. I ran home all the way from school. When I got to the tenement, I found a crowd of gramin' kids an' women around our door. Just then out came a couple of cops with Dad between 'em; an' Ma behind 'em, an' a floor-scrubber cryin' to break her heart. I remember she still had one of those silly birthday candles gripped in her hand. She'd been puttin' it onto the cake when the cops came. After that there wasn't any talk of birthday sprees in the Conover flat. It was up to us to hustle. An' we did. Ma mother went out. Ma father an' as a floor-scrubber. Dad got a job as tally boy in the C. G. & X. yards. That was my start."

He paused again, looked thoughtful, and then went on in a more business-like tone:

"Yes, Mr. Vroom, my father was a convict. Not much of one; but as much as his small self could stand. He was only weighed at the coal scales. He 'fixed' the scales an' took his rake-off. That was all. It went on for a year or so. We got the only square meals I'd ever ate, durin' that time. Then he was sent up; an'—well, Ma wasn't used to scrubbin'. She took pneumonia an' died the year after. Dad got out. He never came back to our neighborhood, an' I haven't seen him since. He may be dead or in jail or a mine owner, for all I know—"

"I'm sorry," said Vroom, "for your arg'ment, but it's a crime of a criminal. Mr. Vroom. Now, if he'd been indicted for misappropriation of the club's funds, like your wife's brother was an' his family had had the indictment quashed by payin' the right parties \$15,000—"

"I see," said Conover, "that Mr. Vroom's rebuked Standish, in answer to a look of frenzied protest from Vroom. 'Your retort is—'

"Is dead-true; an' I've the means of layin' my hands on the proof," finished Caleb. "I'd do it, too—just for the sake of punishin' a cur—if the cur's rebuked Standish, an' I didn't happen to be a clubmate of mine."

"With a man like this on our rolls," fumed an elderly Governor. "We shall lose our reputation for—"

"If some of you fellows could get rid of your reputations," interrupted Caleb, "you'd be in luck."

A man at Standish's left had risen and was waiting a moment of silence in which to speak. He was nattily clad in blue reefer and white duck trousers. A scratching cap lay on the table beside him. Every inch of his stalwart body from the curling black hair and pink cheeks down to the immaculate white canvas shoes bespoke a perfection of grooming that seemed vaguely redolent of scented soap and tailors' models. His full red lips were curled back now from a downy smile, ultra-pearly teeth, and his eyes, which Desiree Shevlin had disrespectfully likened to twin chocolate pies, were gleaming with wrath.

"Well, Brother Blacarda," hailed Conover, breaking off in his reply as his gaze rested on this latest opponent who stood threateningly above him. "What have you got to say? Let's come to congratulate me on the Steel-oid win-out, or have you somethin' to add to the boksays that your little wife's brother made up for me? Speak up, man! Stop lookin' like 'This-Nobby-Style-\$7.49,' an' say what you've got to."

"I've played a trick on my Steel-oid Company," sputtered Blacarda. "That ought to land you in State's Prison with your crook father. A trick that's bound to put you out of the society of decent men. It will certainly put you out of this Club. Either you leave the Arareek or I do."

"Well, now, that's to be sure," Blacarda, purred Caleb. "Us chaplains at the Club will be real sorry to lose you. But if you must go—why take me 'blessin' with you."

"This man, gentlemen," pursued Blacarda, loudly, wheeling to face the rest, "has, by dirty chicanery, absconded with the independent Steel-oid Companies—my own among the number—in his iniquitous trust. Let him deny it if he dares to."

"Deny it?" laughed Caleb. "Not me! Best day's work of my life. Cleaned up an easy million on the deal. Watcher you goin' to do about it?"

"Do about it?" gasped Blacarda. "Do about it? There's a law in the land and—"

"That's so," assented Caleb. "A Federal law an' a law of States, too. It's lucky those two laws ain't the same. Otherwise, you'd have been outlawed from the whole country instead of only from Iowa, the time you promoted that fake Des Moines Improvement Company. But that's neither here nor there. I'm told you're goin' to carry our Steel-oid squabble to the Legislature. I tell you in advance, you'll lose. You may be able to swing part of the assembly, but I can do a swamin' myself up there. You'll find the Steel-oid Trust is goin' to win at the Capital as easy as it won today."

"We have right behind us," blustered Blacarda, "and—"

An' the Steel-oid Trust has Caleb Conover behind it," retorted Caleb. "I guess he's as good a backer as 'Right,' any day. I'm expectin' a tough scramble in order to beat you at the Capital, Blacarda. But I'll do it. I'll be on the ground myself. An' I'll beat you as sure as I beat you today. It'll mean a fight—a big fight. I know that. But a fight's somethin' I don't generally run-ki-yi-in' away from."

"All this is somewhat beside the point, gentlemen," interposed Standish. "Is there any further—"

He paused and glanced about the table. But no one cared to couch lance against the brute who had thus far held the lists so successfully against the Arareek's doughtiest champions. At length Caine spoke.

"It appears to me," he drawled in his lazy, half-bantering tone, "that the proceedings have been decidedly informal; even for an awfully informal meeting. Also, that we have made little real progress on either side. My way of several broken heads, and the atmosphere is somewhat heavy with the reek of battle. But I fail to hear any shout on either side. I'm not from our Honorable Committee. Perhaps you will all pardon me if I suggest that our learned body has gone about the present business in less tactful way than one might have expected from such natural diplomats. Mr. Conover, you have had to answer some extremely important questions. If you have answered them in their own key, I am sure no one can honestly blame you. Unless one case to say anything more. I think the Committee may as well go at once into executive session and put the matter to vote. I so move, Mr. Chairman."

"Hold on a second," said Conover. "You people can vote in a minute if you want to. First, I've got a word more to say. The main counts against me as I take it, are that I had a bad start in life an' that my business methods aren't any better than the business methods of any other man in this Club. Also that I ain't a gentleman. We'll let the question of my business methods slide. I guess there ain't as many stones in the carpet as there used to be here to throw 'em at me on that score. Now, as to my not bein' a gentleman an' my start in life: I started at the bottom of the ladder. I'm only a boy of thirty-three and I'm not far from the top. How many of you could a' got where I am if you'd started where I did? Not a man of you. I worked my way up from tally boy of the C. G. & X. yards to the job of president of the whole road. An' I'm makin' it the biggest road in the State."

"Hold I do it?" By fightin'. I had no pull, no cash, no family at my back. Ev'rybody took a turn at tryin' to step on my hands when I was grab a new rung of the ladder. But I climbed on—an' I fought on. To-day I'm as rich a man as there is in Granite. Other rich men wear medals. I wear a Club an' got fun out of it. So I joined it, too. I've as good a right to fun as anyone. An' I'm goin' to have it. That's why I won't get no 'no' from you. You can't put me. You're goin' to vote on my case in a few minutes. An' you're goin' to vote to keep me here. Not because you love me, but because I've made you do it. If you hit a sulky dog with an axe-handle, he won't exactly love you. But he'll mind you, right time. An' it's better to be minded than to be ignored. I guess there won't anybody here ignore me in future."

"By the way, gentlemen: Just to show how much interested I am in the Club's welfare, I bought in the mortgage on the Arareek's house and grounds last month. I bought it for fear it might fall in the hands of a crook member who'd foreclose if he was dropped from the Club. Or such a crank as might foreclose if he was treated like a measly social leper by the Club's blowouts. That's all, gentlemen. I'll wait out on the porch for your verdict. Good-day, all. I'll excuse the Committee from risin' and escortin' me to the door."

He rose, stretched his big frame and lounged out of the room. Silence accompanied his exit, but was split by a dozen excited voices the moment the door slammed behind him.

Caleb Conover was loafing in a long wicker chair on the veranda, a cigar in his mouth and a long, frosty glass at his side. He was idly watching the putting match on the green before him. The veranda's other occupants had more or less unobtrusively withdrawn to the far end of the porch, leaving him quite alone.

It was thus Caleb found him when the Committee meeting broke up. The newspaper editor strolled across toward Conover, a tantalizing smile on his thin, bored face.

"Is dead-true?" he queried.

Conover glanced up eagerly at his friend's approval.

"Say, Caine," he asked pointing. "Why do they choose one of the iron-tipped sticks sometimes and then use one of the brass headed ones next time, for just the same kind of a swat?"

Caine gazed down at Caleb in genuine wonder; then dropped into a chair at his side.

"Conover," he declared. "You're the only man on earth who never bores me. And it's because you never by any chance happen to say or do what people have a right to expect you to do."

"If it's a riddle—," said Caleb, puzzled, as he looked away from the green.

"It isn't. It's genius," answered Caine. "Here I come to bring you the decision of the Committee. The decision that's supposedly been keeping you on pins and needles. And instead of dragging the news out of me by main force, you ask a question about a putting match."

"Ob, the decision?" returned Caleb, carelessly. "That's all right. I'm to be kept on as a poplar, respected member. I knew that before I left the Committee room."

"You knew more than I did, then."

"I always do," agreed Caleb with utter simplicity. "That's why I'm when I'm today. If I couldn't size up folk's plans before they made 'em, I'd still be a brakeman on the C. G. & X. or runnin' the railroad saloon where I made my first cash. I'm kept in the Club by ev'ry vote except Blacarda's."

"You listened?" cried Caine in wonder. "Son," sighed Caleb, wearily. "You make me tired. Why should I listen when I knew already?"

(To be Continued.)

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